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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000831

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FRENCH AMBASSADOR TRIES TO DOWNPLAY
KOUCHNER'S DIALOGUE PROPOSAL, SEEKS WAYS TO REDUCE
POTENTIAL DAMAGE

REF: PARIS 2405

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C/NF) In a 6/9 meeting with French Ambassador Bernard Emie, Ambassador Feltman registered strong concern about the proposal by French Foreign Minister Kouchner to host Lebanese political and civil society figures to a national dialogue in France in late June. Emie (please protect throughout) indicated that he, too, questioned the idea but had no choice but to follow instructions. There will be some kind of meeting in France, he reported, for "second-tier leaders." Confiding that some in Paris wanted to go so far as to invite President Emile Lahoud to send a representative, Emie said that he would attempt to use the 6/10-12 visit of French special envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran to lower expectations and restrict the invitation list. Emie welcomed the Ambassador's suggestion that, if this misguided idea was to be pursued, then some link be found to the Lebanese National Dialogue, as a good excuse to limit participation. The Ambassador talked to several March 14 figures who, while unhappy about the French initiative, feel they have no choice but to go along. They expressed support for the idea of using the existing National Dialogue decisions as a launching point for discussions. End summary.

EMIE HEARS USG CONCERNS

12. (C) Meeting with Emie on 6/9, Ambassador Feltman expressed deep concern about the Kouchner proposal to invite Lebanese political and civil society leaders for a 48-hour dialogue session in France in late June. While the gabfest may not aim at tangible results, perceptions can be deeply damaging. Asked by Emie to elaborate, the Ambassador noted the following: First, the March 8-Aoun bloc has already trumpeted victory, saying that the French initiative demonstrates that post-Chirac France has "corrected" its policy by adopting an even-handed approach to Lebanon. Second, by hosting such an event, France suggests that it sees as equally valid the pro-independence views of March 14 and the pro-Syrian views of March 8. Third, by appearing to move away from the long-standing and successful cooperation with the USG on Lebanon, France is leaving Siniora and his cabinet more exposed to charges of being American agents. Fourth, the initiatives makes it appear as though schisms are

developing between French and U.S. positions; the pro-Syrians will exploit this perception to promote public doubts. Fifth, if the rumors about the guest list are true, France is inexplicably reviving the political fortunes of discredited Syrian agents like Suleiman Franjeh and Talal Arslan. Sixth, France has put March 14 and GOL leaders in an awkward position: March 14 and GOL figures tell us that they hate the French idea, but, if they say no while the March 8-Aoun bloc embraces the idea, Kouchner will view March 14/GOL figures as unhelpful and March 8-Aoun leaders as friendly. Seventh, the Lebanese leaders already declined Saudi Arabia's invitation to host dialogue sessions, so France is now making a problem for the Sunnis with Riyadh. Eighth, the Lebanese are notorious for transferring decision making to outsiders, and France is now providing an easy opportunity for them to evade their own responsibilities. Ninth, the French-sponsored talks could inadvertently become the new floor for discussion, sweeping away useful precedents such as Siniora's 7 points, UNSCR 1701, and so on.

EMIE INSISTS FRENCH POSITION UNCHANGED,
EVEN IF NEW TEAM PURSUES NEW TACTICS

13. (C/NF) Emie took notes and said that he would convey the Ambassador's concerns to Paris. France and the United States "are not drifting apart," he insisted. But "you are sending a confused message," he said, referring the visit of Speaker Pelosi to Damascus in April and Secretary Rice's meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim in Sharm ash-Sheikh in May. Washington also needs to understand that the new team in Paris is doing what all new teams do: "they think they know best" and want to show different tactics than those

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followed by their predecessors. "Every administration thinks it is more clever than the last." But at its core, French-U.S. cooperation on Lebanon remains solid. Emie referred to the importance of Jean-David Levitte in Sarkozy's inner circle to reinforce his point about "no evolution" in French policy toward Lebanon. "Sincerely, I don't perceive a shift," he said, noting that Kouchner's public comments during his Lebanon trip "could not have been more supportive" of the March 14/GOL positions. "Frankly, I am disappointed by our (March 14) friends. They should know better (than to doubt)."

14. (C/NF) Adding that "this is not for your report," Emie (please protect throughout) acknowledged that "this may not be the most brilliant idea ever of French foreign policy." Kouchner, Emie said, "still thinks he is just Bernard Kouchner," someone who has known Lebanon and Lebanese politicians for decades. He does not realize that, as French foreign minister, his role must be different. Emie agreed with the Ambassador that the distinction that Kouchner is hosting the event in his personal capacity is a subtlety that will be lost on the Lebanese. But, Emie emphasized, the event will happen. Emie is under instructions to support it. Emie said that he would try to "downplay" the event. The Ambassador noted that, in media-frenzied Lebanon, the arrival of a senior French envoy, Ambassador Jean-Claude Cousseran, for consultations 6/10-12 would hardly enable Emie to lower expectations. "I guess you are right," Emie conceded. (Comment: We had the impression that the "personal capacity" descriptions and the "downplay" remarks were lame attempts to reassure us rather than influence the Lebanese perceptions. End comment.)

KOUCHNER WANTS TO USE HIS CONNECTIONS
TO FACILITATE INTRA-LEBANESE COMMUNICATION

15. (C) Emie said that, while the Kouchner initiative "may be difficult to explain," it is easier to explain what it is not. France does not intend to transfer Lebanon's (now suspended) National Dialogue process to Paris. France is not

hosting a regional meeting. France does not want to supplant Saudi Arabia, which, as in the Taif accord, would probably be the location where any deal among Lebanese politicians would be finalized and announced. Unlike the January Paris III, this is not an international conference on Lebanon. But France believes that the passage of UNSCR 1757 and the establishment of the Special Tribunal on Lebanon "opens a new chapter." It is important for the Lebanese leaders to resume the communications between them. Kouchner wants to use his personal connections to Lebanon and his knowledge of the players to facilitate the contacts among the Lebanese. Maybe it is best to think of the initiative "as an informal workshop or a roundtable or a seminar or whatever, nothing else."

EMIE HOPES TO LIMIT PARTICIPATION
TO DIALOGUE, CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

¶16. (C) Responding to Emie's comment that there will be "no agenda," the Ambassador asked how a 48-hour workshop would be organized. Surely there will have to be some kind of script. Emie said that he expected that people will be invited to give their thoughts on how to "strengthen the role of the state." Asked about the list of anticipated guests, Emie said that it remained a work in progress. The guests would be "second-tier" political figures and civil society representatives. It was not true, he insisted, that decisions had been taken to invite Suleiman Franjeh and Talal Arslan. Emie's idea was to limit the participation to representatives of the 14 leaders who had been at the main table in the National Dialogue as well as people he described as civil society "facilitators" who are mostly well known to Kouchner. In that category, Emie mentioned Ziad Barroud, Ibrahim Shemsiddine, Kamal Muhenna, and Mohammed Sammak.

BUT PARIS HAS SOME "STRANGE IDEAS" FOR GUEST LIST

¶17. (C/NF) Pressed by the Ambassador, Emie acknowledged that such a guest list was his proposal only. Paris, he said, has

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some "strange ideas." Indeed, some in Kouchner's circle had talked about Franjeh and Arslan. Someone had even suggested that President Emile Lahoud be invited to send a representative, Emie confided (asking that such thoughts not be shared with Washington). While saying that he was "fed up," Emie said that he was confident that people like Lahoud, Arslan, and Franjeh ultimately would not get invitations. Jean-Claude Cousseran would "see everybody in town," and Emie would use Cousseran's visit to narrow down the list of potential invitees to "something that makes sense." The Ambassador noted that there is huge difference between a credible civil society representative such as Ziad Barroud and Ali Khassan Khalil, whom Emie mentioned as the likely representative of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and who is nothing except a Syrian agent and Syrian liaison with Berri. "What can I do," Emie said.

LINKING FRENCH INITIATIVE
TO NATIONAL DIALOGUE DECISIONS

¶18. (C) Noting that he was sharing only his personal views, the Ambassador suggested to Emie that he work with Cousseran on parameters for the initiative that would by definition limit the participation to representatives of the 14 National Dialogue leaders and the civil society facilitators. For example, the Ambassador noted, the 2006 National Dialogue session came to four decisions (disarming the Palestinians outside the refugee camps, establishing good relations based on mutual respect with Syria, working with Syria to demarcate the common border, and establishing the Special Tribunal). With the Nahr al-Barid fight presumably over by the time of the French initiative, maybe the participants could discuss

how to implement the National Dialogue decision on disarming the Palestinians outside the camps.

¶9. (C) Such an approach, the Ambassador said, would limit the participation in the way Emie prefers while also reinforcing, rather than undermining, an important decision already taken by Lebanon's political leaders. Politically, even if in the aftermath of Nahr al-Barid the pro-Syrians don't want to see further LAF action, it would be hard for people to come out against such a focus: the Lebanese public want to see the Palestinian military bases dismantled. And, in the unlikely event that a consensus did emerge about action to take against the Palestinian military bases outside the refugee camps, the French will have done a real service for the Lebanese state. Emie said that he liked the idea "very much" and would share it with Cousseran.

¶9. (C) Subsequently, the Ambassador shared his idea -- again, emphasizing that he was sharing his personal ideas, not a USG official position -- with Senior Advisor to the PM Mohammed Chatah, MP Saad Hariri, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, and Minister of Communications (allied with Jumblatt) Marwan Hamadeh. All thought that, if the French initiative must for forward, a focus on how to implement the National Dialogue decisions taken a year ago made sense. We conveyed that back by phone to Emie, who expressed hope that March 14 and GOL leaders would make that point to Cousseran. All groused that they were being cornered into accepting the French invitation to send representatives. Hamadeh noted that, if the Americans are unhappy about now being consulted, "imagine how we feel."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) For all the reasons cited in the second paragraph above, Kouchner's initiative is ill advised and has the potential to result in misperceptions with damaging political repercussions here. But, short of the kind of major security calamity in Lebanon that none of us wishes to see, we do not envision any way to dissuade the French from proceeding. The initiative has already been announced publicly, and Cousseran arrives today. Thus, in our view, our best approach is to try to steer the French in the most constructive direction possible.

¶11. (C) As we said privately to Emie, it strikes us that the unimplemented decisions of the March-July 2006 National Dialogue are potentially a good starting point for the French

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discussions. By linking the discussions to the National Dialogue, people like Lahoud, Franjieh, and Arslan are automatically excluded. And the participation of those March 8-Aoun representatives who will be invited derives not from a "correction" in French foreign policy but rather from a 2006 Lebanese decision. (Per Emie's idea, Kouchner can still add some of his civil society friends as "facilitators.") Moreover, in light of the dramatic events of Nahr al-Barid, this may, in fact, be the right time for the Lebanese to think seriously about how to dismantle the Palestinian military bases outside of the refugee camps. At a minimum, making reference to the 2006 National Dialogue reinforces rather than undermines the useful decisions already taken by the Lebanese themselves. (It would be even better for the French to invite participants on the basis on how to implement the Lebanese obligations in UNSCR 1701 or how to secure the Lebanese-Syrian border, as such an invitation would undoubtedly kill the initiative: Hizballah and probably some others wouldn't go. But France would surely not buy this approach.)

¶12. (C) Even if it is unrealistic to think that the French initiative could result in a consensus behind specific approaches regarding Palestinian arms, encouraging the French to move in this direction should limit the potential damage

of this initiative: even the Hizballah representative, mindful of Lebanese public opinion, will have to pay lip service to the need to disarm the Palestinians. While we should not say this in advance for fear of spooking the French, if we can persuade them to focus their initiative on the National Dialogue's decisions on Palestinian arms, the initiative might in the end result in giving us some good ideas or at least good statements that are consistent with the need for UNSCR 1559 implementation. We will talk with March 14 leaders today (Sunday) who will see Cousseran, in hopes that they can promote a constructive approach.

FELTMAN